

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL INTERVIEWED BY LARNE ABSE GOGARTY

Alabama-born, Chicago-based artist Kerry James Marshall believes that you have to work with the history you start out with before you can change it, but first you need to know everything you can about everything.

Untitled
(*Underpainting*)
2018



CHECK IT OUT

Larne Abse Gogarty: Could you start by saying something about your exhibition ‘History of Painting’ – in particular, I was wondering about the auction paintings and *Untitled (underpainting)*.

Kerry James Marshall: The first thing to say is they don’t have anything to do with the recent Sotheby’s auction. [In May 2018, Marshall’s *Past Times*, 1997, was sold for \$21.1m by Sotheby’s, making his work the most expensive by a living African-American artist. Later, it was revealed that rap mogul P Diddy was the buyer.] I started developing this idea as a proposal back in 2005 when I had a show at the MCA Chicago, which was supposed to be a survey, but I didn’t want to do a survey. I just wanted to lay out a series of propositions about something I might do later. In that show, there was a group of paintings based on grocery store circulars and that was the first time I thought about using auction sale prices as a way to ultimately talk about how artworks are traded as commodities like any other, but just at a different level, in another arena. So those paintings were initially setting up a schematic proposal. I always intended to go back to them and make them into something that functions the way



In a democratic sense, there is a notion of equality and fairness which sets the bar as if we should all be interested in the same things for the same kind of reasons, but that's just not realistic. So because I don't have another art history to begin from, I begin from what was introduced to me when I started out. That's all I have.

painting functions. So this is the first group that really kind of fulfils that whole idea.

The underpainting harkens back to the first show I did here in London with David Zwirner. Downstairs there was an abstract painting that looked like a Rorschach blot. So that painting was about a seeming abstraction that set up a relative symmetry in the picture. It wasn't a blot that happened as phenomenon, like when we unfold a canvas or piece of paper and you end up with symmetry. This appeared to be a blot but was actually a representation of what a blot is supposed to look like, but controlled and built up like you would any other painting you were composing. So I made something that looked like a blot but wasn't. *Underpainting* was built off that idea, with two sides that seem to be similar, but which have differences. So it has this same sort of relative symmetry. It is the same size as the original blot but now it's fleshed out. The scene is all invented, but the closest model would be the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

How much did your 2016-17 retrospective, 'Mastry', inform what you have made since?

Usually retrospectives mark an end of something, a summing-up, as well as new works that signal where you are. But what I try to avoid is redundancy. I try to avoid doing the same thing the same way, all the time, year after year. Instead, the idea is to map out a series of strategies that could keep you going for the rest of your life, which means you always have something new to do. The show just closed in July, so it is still recent and when you do shows like that it's hard to keep working while they're on because you are required to keep going out and telling the

Past Times 1997

'Mastry' installation view, MCA Chicago



same story over and over again to different groups of people. So the interruptions disrupt a workflow pretty substantially. I have done more work during and while that was going on, but this is the first gallery show since. The way this show is set up is to try to not do what I have done before. After this, I'll try to have myself in a place where I don't do something publicly for a while but can figure out what I really want to invest time in for the next go-round. So, in a way, calling this show 'History of Painting' is a way of laying that all out on the table, from the rudimentary way that paintings exist – fundamentally as swatches of colour – to the black boy painting which is a kind of language into image, to the underpainting, the two portraits and then the auction paintings which are ultimately what happens to artworks, they circulate through the system as commodities. I really needed to fulfil the possibility of that, from the prototype I had set up, to show that artworks are as viable a subject for painting as anything else.

Could you talk about the receptions for your work in the different cities 'Mastry' travelled to in the US, but also in terms of differences in your reception in Europe? Particularly I am thinking about how you mobilise European history painting, while the subjects within them speak directly to an African-American experience.

What you have to acknowledge is that the whole history of art is not built around the participation of black people within it. So the audiences that are used to that history, who go to galleries and museums, they want different things from those places than I do, or most black people do. What a lot of black people are excited about is seeing themselves in those places and what it means for black people to be a part of that which is different. So here we are, wanting to be part of something that was developed without our participation and then you wonder, well, what does it mean when I look at the work, and you look at the work, do you see the same thing, does it mean the same thing? While you are coming at the work with a certain sense of belonging to the tradition that the work came out of, I feel most black people come to the work as interlopers. We are interested in seeing black people in pictures, but you're not particularly interested in this, why would you be? In a democratic sense, there is a notion of equality and fairness which sets the bar as if we should all be interested in the same things for the same kind of reasons, but that's just not realistic. So because I don't have another art history to begin from, I begin from what was introduced to me when I started out. That's all I have. When I

went to the museum, I didn't go to a museum that had different stuff. And only when I became older did it become an issue, so you end up with a kind of mission to make sure there is greater representation, but that's for me, and that's for us.

What do you feel drives forward representation and visibility in a situation which appeals to democracy but so often has the status of an unfulfilled fantasy or false ideal?

Well, it would be a good idea to have broad representation, but can you really have that when you're not seeing things the same way? African people and black people didn't see African art as primitive so they couldn't possibly be motivated by the same impulses as European modernists in abandoning the academic authority and going to something that seemed more authentic and closer to the fundamental, base human impulse to express themselves. That's a purely European projection. What didn't exist in Africa was the same mercantile enterprise that drove the need for a thing called the Avant Garde. What capitalism requires you to do is create things in excess of necessity, and that just didn't exist in other places. In having to create that excess beyond necessity, you have to figure out some way to do something that's different and novel – crazy, wacky, whatever you want to call it – but you've got to do something to make people pay attention to what you're doing, which requires a different sort of self-consciousness to make happen. In the West, markets have driven almost all the developments in the transformation of what art looks like. How do I focus attention on me as opposed to the generation of artists who were operative before me? How can I make myself different from them? That drives the momentum in the West. It wasn't that way in Yorubaland. And then you have people that have been colonised or enslaved, and they're not coming into the market in the same place where you're trying to generate this momentum, but they're coming in as commodities themselves.

You often refer to your teachers by name – from your kindergarten teacher Mary Hill to the painter Charles White – and it's clear how significant those people were for you. Can you say something about how you think about teaching yourself?

If you believe in any way at all in the idea of progress, and that the moment we are in is unique in any way, then it's unique because we have the benefit of centuries of thought and technical development when it comes to making things and the reasons why things should continue to be made. The



left
History of Painting
(May 16, 2007)
2018

above
'Mastry' installation
view, MCA Chicago

accumulated knowledge about pictures and how they work, and how they are made, that is supposed to give us some sort of advantage. Because we have access to how all those things have been made, not just where we are but everywhere in the world, and also since human beings have been making things, I feel like in this moment we have an obligation to know it. To know what they were doing. To study it and have an idea about it and then from that, that's the only way you can figure out if you have something that hasn't been done, that might still be left to do. I think it's the only way. So when it comes to education, my position is that you are required to know everything. You are! As a 21st-century person, you are required to know everything you can possibly know about the way that artworks have been thought about or operate within a culture, and then you make your choices based on that. So when I teach, that's the approach I take. Look at everything, figure out how it works, and know it from the inside out. Then try to do what you think you need to do. That's my approach. Just because people make stuff it doesn't mean it's interesting. And just because somebody with authority said it was worthwhile, that doesn't mean it is. You have to be able to check that yourself.

Is that your biggest frustration – seeing art that is superfluous or lacking in any kind of consequence?

Yes, always. I'm trying to make work that I think is consequential. Or at least that is always engaged in the discrepancies between doing things one way or the other. I am always thinking about that. So that relates to the way this show is set up – that's the format. You have to be able to look at all those things that are there and be curious about why this and why that. That is interesting to me. In some ways, attempts to psychoanalyse or make a sociological reading, those ideas are not interesting to me because I see the whole enterprise of making art as a rational enterprise and I'm not interested in the irrational.

Or chance, or the indeterminate?

Or chance, exactly. I'm not interested in that. I'm only interested in the constructed relationship between things. I read an interview with John Cage about Marcel Duchamp. There's a section where Cage says he is interested in chance but not the kind of chance that Duchamp is interested in. He says I am not interested in a situation where anything can happen, but instead I am interested



in setting up the parameters so the things I want to happen are more likely to happen than not.

Do you feel that the stakes around those mantras of chance, indeterminacy and the irrational, which are so much part of 20th-century art history, are now invalid?

Yes, because that kind of idea of chance has already been so thoroughly codified and canonised. Not only do people come to admire Duchamp's urinal in the gallery, but their kids get sent to school to learn how to do it too. It has lost any potency, or any of the transgressive character it was supposed to have. And now it's just lazy. Honestly, it is just laziness.

You are known primarily as a painter, but you make other work: photographs, comic strips, installations and so on. What drives you to those other forms? Is it that you have an idea that can't work as a painting, or a desire to simply be working with different materials and modes of making?

There are things that are more effective, for whatever it is you are trying to do, in other media. You don't just make paintings because you're a painter. You make them because you believe that there is some sort of necessity for them, and that they can make some kind of argument about their own viability. I mean, really, that's central. That's the only reason to keep doing it. It's hard to keep doing it. It would be easy to get up in the morning and just repeat, but having a really good reason to do something beyond the fact that *you can*, or because you're producing a product because there is a market for it. I mean, you could do that, but how satisfying would that be in the long term?

Do you ever worry about running out of ideas?

Never. I have more stuff I want to do than I will have time to do. Laying out this series of propositions for things I want to do, I will be able to do these over the whole of my career. The *Rythm Mastr* project comes from that too, the auction paintings, the black paintings. I think all these things are consequential in different ways. So people think of me as a figurative painter – why would I have done the Rorschach blot? Well, partly it's to talk about the discrepancy between the gesture and the concept, or the intellectual versus the impulsive. Which one of those things is abstraction? Abstract Expressionism says it is the

When it comes to education, my position is that you are required to know everything. You are! As a 21st-century person, you are required to know everything you can possibly know about the way that artworks have been thought about or operate within a culture, and then you make your choices based on that.

impulse, and in order to understand the value of that it requires a sympathetic and sensitive reader to feel the impulse with the person who made it. But if it's an intellectual exercise, then you have to know something and it's not that the work comes from some special personality that has this particular sensitivity and feeling. It's not about that – and even the former is not about that – it's an illusion. So I just want to be explicit about the fact that, no, this work is not expressive, I am working with ideas. And I want the person looking at it to understand that everything that has happened here is deliberate, and that it's for something, there is a reason and that you can easily decide what the reason is if you check with the history of art. You will see that it's appealing to another person we are supposed to know. If you know something about abstraction, this work appeals to what you think you know, and you can use that to figure out whether this thing succeeds in what it attempts to do or not.

Is that generally how those quotations operate in your work?

Yes, that's how I think about things.

What about the place of text in your work? This shifts from functioning as signs in works like *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*, 2009, as thought bubbles in *Sob Sob*, 2003, or song lyrics in *Past Times*, 1997. What is the reasoning behind the use of text in your work?

There are two different kinds there. There are the lyrics to a song, which if you know the song and read the lyrics, it puts the song in your head so that means you have a soundtrack to the work and it creates a whole environment. Some of the other text is because I am always trying to be explicit and clear. So the moment you put the label 'Frankenstein' and 'Bride of Frankenstein' into those pictures, with those figures, what are the implications of that? I really want people to think about the implication of those two terms in relation to the painting. It's a key to analysing the relationship between things. ■

Larne Abse Gogarty is a writer and lecturer in history and theory of art at the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL.

Kerry James Marshall's exhibition 'History Paintings' at David Zwirner, London continues to 10 November.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.